

## Bridging the Digital Divide: Community Technology Centers in the U.S.

Advances in information technology have revolutionized business processes worldwide and helped fuel the longest economic expansion in the history of the United States. Prosperity, however, has skipped over millions of Americans—especially those living in inner cities or rural communities where access to technology is often limited or non-existent.

The “digital divide”—the gap in information technology accessibility, computer literacy, and Internet connectivity between some U.S. neighborhoods and communities and most others—is both the cause and consequence of widening socioeconomic disparities in the midst of overall prosperity.

Bridging the gap by creating “digital opportunity” is now a national goal. In 2000, government agencies were ordered to work with public, private, and non-profit sectors to help make computer and Internet access available to every American. President Bush has now proposed \$80 million in additional funding to this end. Two federal initiatives, *Neighborhood Networks* and the *America Connects Consortium*, are at the forefront.

*Neighborhood Networks* is a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) initiative that establishes computer-based multiservice centers through innovative public and private partnerships. These centers assist people in low-income housing to learn skills critical to competing in today’s technology-intensive job market. Today, there are more than 600 HUD community technology centers in low-income neighborhoods throughout the country. That is more than double the number in 1997, when ICF Consulting began supporting the initiative.

Community technology centers can make a real difference in people’s lives. Less than five years ago, Trenzetta Barabin entered a computer-training class at the Versailles Arms Apartments *Neighborhood*

*Networks* Center in New Orleans, Louisiana. With a combination of continued training, access to technology, and her own persistence, she advanced from volunteer to part-time receptionist, and eventually, to instructor at the center. With her increased salary and benefits, she purchased her first home and moved out of the Versailles Arms in September 1999. Recently, Barabin took another step upwards by landing a position with the local school system handling computer software programs for area schools.



Creating digital opportunity, as critical as it may be, will not reverse the economic fortunes of neighborhoods and communities by itself. ICF Consulting knows from experience the complex causes of socioeconomic disparities. Lifting a neighborhood and its residents out of poverty requires attention to multiple factors.

ICF Consulting is responding to the digital divide with a variety of approaches and working with a range of public and private organizations. For example, our transportation planners are exploring how to reduce vehicular traffic by placing new businesses and residences in underutilized urban areas—“urban infill.” ICF Consulting is addressing the economic utilization of “brownfields” (former industrial properties) from environmental, energy-efficiency, and community-development perspectives. ICF Consulting also is participating in a pioneer study in Austin, Texas, to determine how best to link the economies of minority neighborhoods to surrounding prosperous regional economies. Our technical assistance to community technology centers enables our consultants to work one-on-one with people in low-income neighborhoods and understand in personal terms the effectiveness of diverse economic development initiatives. ■